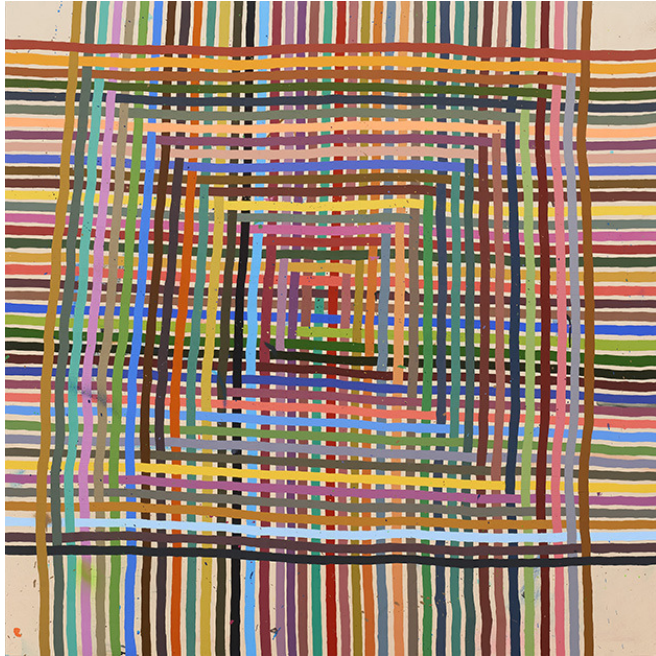


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San Francisco Chronicle



Alicia McCarthy, *Untitled* (2017) Photograph by Phocasso/J.W. White © Alicia McCarthy, Courtesy of Berggruen Gallery

Alicia McCarthy's free spirit on display at Berggruen

By Charles Desmarais | Friday, March 17, 2017

Alicia McCarthy has occupied a near-legendary place among artists in the Bay Area for more than two decades, first as a street artist, then as a principal of the so-called Mission School, most recently as a revered teacher. She has been represented for many years by Jack Hanley Gallery, now in New York and formerly of San Francisco, and was chosen this year for the prestigious SECA Award of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Yet, for all that credibility, the presentation of her work at the blue-chip Berggruen Gallery, which opened to the public on Friday, March 17, is a career landmark.

McCarthy's slyly inventive, joyously off-kilter abstract paintings, drawings and prints have always had a distinctly punk inflection, and there will be those who find this show too buttoned-up. Instead of paintings on misshapen found materials, nailed to the wall at their corners, these are rectangles that look like canvases (they are mounted plywood panels) hung traditionally. Drawings and prints are professionally framed. The pristine galleries — this is just the second exhibition in Berggruen's stylish new space — are undisturbed. They comfortably embrace the art.

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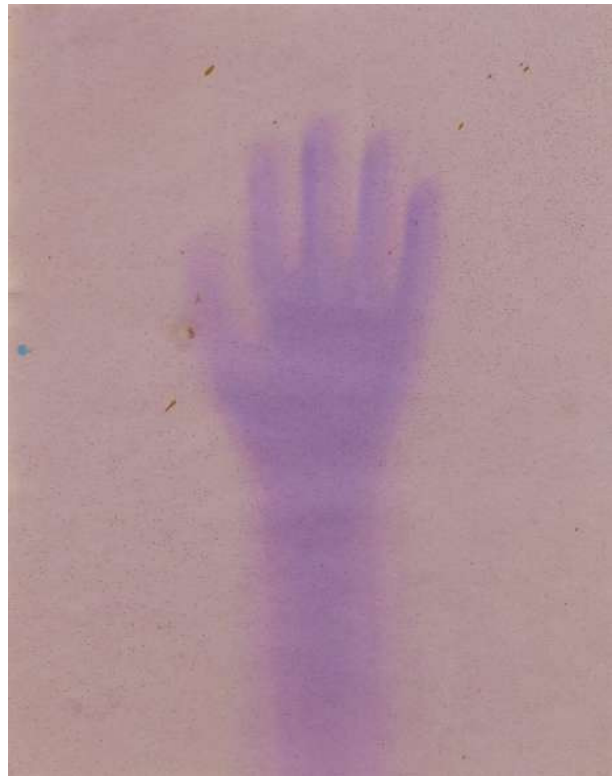
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That's not a bad thing. What was once inventive adaptation — of discarded materials and of vernacular visual expression (graffiti, folk art, outmoded commercial signage, doodles) — was at risk of degenerating into tired trope. Here, stripped of the affectation of slackerism, we get a clearer idea than ever of what the artist and her work are really about.

Still a feral artistic spirit, McCarthy is acting a bit less leery in her late 40s. This is the closest she has allowed us to come.

We enter the exhibition at the top of a flight of stairs, faced with an 8-by-8-foot loose grid of bright lines. It is a large example of what the artist refers to as her “weave” paintings. (None of the 22 works in the exhibition is titled; all were made in 2016 or 2017.) It is a signature form for her, and she has made many variations. Some are on view, along with two vaguely landscapish riffs. They use more limited palettes of black and brown, violet and gray; there's also a smaller multicolored panel.

Top: An 8-by-8-foot grid by Alicia McCarthy is on prominent display. Above: sun-bleached construction paper. Both 2017 McCarthy works are untitled.
Phocasso/J.W. White © Alicia McCarthy,
Courtesy of Berggruen Gallery



One would be forgiven for thinking of an outsize summer-camp potholder, but for the dazzling illogic of the warp and weft. If the lines were threads, the thing would fall apart. What holds it together is a kind of electromagnetic energy, a centrifugal force of pigment and pattern.

I'm not about to start counting the colors (perhaps as many as there are lines?). It's clear they were not chosen to harmonize: some recede, some flash like rogue lights in a haywire neon marquee.

The phrase “abstract art” is always problematic. Mark-making is by its nature symbolic; all art is abstract. The visual pleasures and puzzles of McCarthy's top-of-the-stairs painting may share some things with the works now on view in a show on the first and lower levels of the gallery, all of them “abstract.” But the power of her work lies not in competing with history, but in sidestepping it to set her own terms.

In this first-encountered painting are two color bars that were not set down with the thick brushes used to apply gouache lines to the rest of the piece, on a field first rolled with ordinary house paint. They came from a spray can.

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They seem an obvious reference to the artist's personal history as a graffiti artist, but they also put us on notice that the materials of fine art have only so much value in this context.

Furry and crawly, they also suggest that something animal is part of the painting. Or animist, seen alongside a small but exuberant blue presence spinning in the background at top left, and another little gold one swimming at the bottom.

Other paintings in the show similarly invite close attention, and further speculation. Showers of spattered paint become galaxies and constellations; smears of brilliant color might be objects too quick to track by eye.

I have wondered in the past whether I was reading too much into the paintings. Abstraction, even when it leads to spiritual ends, tends to get there by way of system and analysis, not a story line.

But the 12 mesmerizing drawings included here extend our understanding of McCarthy's concerns. Intricate colored-pencil patterns are laid over construction paper that has faded in spots with exposure to light. Mists and clouds of spray paint appear under, then atop the pencil lattices and nets. A feeling of suspension, of floating across a perforate plane is one sensation. We sense a presence, a figure faintly perceived through a colored fog in other works.

In three works, a spectral hand is raised as if in greeting. A close reading of the exhibition checklist reveals that they were made by bleaching construction paper in the sun. They will, one assumes, continue to fade in the light. The hand, however, will be forever entangled in the fibers of the artist's medium.

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